Dear Jim,

10/10/84

When Gary Mack phoned last week, about some of his work and FOIA matters, he said something that reminded me of what you tols me in 1977 and I asked him to phone you because I believed I do not have your to me new address. In thinking further yesterday I recalled that I do have your address, so I'm writing.

In 1977 you said that if I ever get a new car you can be of help, even with the distance between us. That was 1977 and may well not be true today.

Whether or not you can help that way, I believe that you know the field well enough to be able to give me good advice.

My old 1965 Valiant appears to be in fine shape. For my possible uses of a car it is from adequate to superior, as I'll explain. But it is 20 years old, does have 155,000+ miles (with me as the only driver), and repairs are getting exhorbitant. When the parts are available, the prices are astronomical. I've had to replace remarkably few parts - the head has never been off - but when they are available they are so high the dealer is embarrassed. I had to replace a universal joint earlier this year. It used to cost $25 he told me. Now $154. Thendented trim around the headlights, $52 each!

Last year I made a deal with the local dealer for defectibe body work of the past, plastic instead of metal, to be replaced with metal for $300 if he could do it in his time. He was to call He never did, so I went back, and he said he'd then do it for $350, if he could do it in slack time. I've still not heard and I'm sure it will now run to at least $400, just to deter the rusting. No dents to remove, etc.

Because this comes to a fair percentage of the cost of a new car it made me wonder if I'd not be better off if I do get a new and effecient one. I need the automatic shift tha this Valiant has because of limited use of the left leg, but when I never drive out of town and won't, ever, it means that I do much of my driving in second gear, 25 mph limit. (I am limited to about 20 minutes at a time of keeping the left leg down and I listen to my doctors.) I haven't driven more than 20 minutes at a time since about two montsh after I last saw you. I can ride longer, with the leg up, but it knocks me out. So I do that only every six weeks, when I'm driven to DC for the regular surgical checkup.

My daily routine is two miles to a nearby mall for walking therapy, lasting three hours except Mondays and Thursdays, when I have blood tests. That means five miles plus five more after the tests, plus two more from the ~~mkjt~~ mall to home. I don't often drive more than that much any day, but when I do, it is all local, like taking my wife shopping.

Last winter the old Valiant didn't struggle once in starting. Amazing! I'd always changed the points and condenser, but last year I decided to leave well enough alone and changed on the plugs. That was fine because the walking therapy daily is very important and all my doctors (three regularly) rave about the good it has done and is doing.

Because we are now both past 70, with newer ailments possible, and because I have daily medical need for dependable transportation, if something happens to this old but durable car I'd have problems. Or have to buy a new car in an emergency, which would not be an advantageous way. This, too, has made me think of a change, kind of like insurance.

We both need real headroom to enter and leave. I now slide onto and off the seat, having to turn first in leaving. This is one of the advantages of the old style of the Valiant. However, although I have not kept up on new cars, I have experience with one, the one in which I'm driven to the surgeon. It is a Dodge K, and getting into it is no problem for me. (I often sit in front for about 15-20 minutes, then get out and walk, then get onto the back seat, to keep the leg up, so I know the front is no problem. But the back is a little bit.) It may not cost more than I can pay but it may cost more than would be wise. Our reserves are scanty, and at our age there is always the possibility of need for more than reserves.

Several years ago there was publicity about an electric car. It had limited range and I suppose was expensive. I've heard nothing recently, nothing about their cost, battery life, safety, etc. If they are good, with my car in the carport most of the time and never diven more than 40 minutes a day, I can see that there could be some advantages, and I'm sure the current would cost less than gas.

Safety is a real factor because I bleed at not much more than a look. If you are on coumadin, I'm now on 17.5 mg daily, and you'll recognize that as h high dosage. I'm not supposed even to get a bump, and I can hemorrhage under the skin if I miss a doorknob.

I thought about replacing the car again when Lil's cousin, who has a Pontiac agency about 15 miles away, had promised to have his paint-shop man meet me in Frederick to take a look at the body work and give me an estimate. He has been so busy since February that he can't take any more work on. And then I saw the publicity about the new effeciency ratings, with a Honda close to 50 mpg. It made me think again. I think one Chevvy model was third in effeciency, and that there is a Pontiac that is its equivalent.

If the brother in the dealership who handles the shop also handled sales I'd possibly be able to get a good deal from him. But not from the two brothers who handle sales. All of Lil's nearby brothers and sisters get their cars from them but with little or no break on the price.

Some The local dealers do not enjoy the best reputations, and where the work is good, as at the Dodge dealership near me, which has done my work since I've been in Frederick, the prices are high. Last I paid was $32 an hour for just labor, and for small jobs, $15 a quarter hour. A friend's stepson, a good mechanic, has moved from one to another because he has not been satisfied with their repair policies and practises. He remained less time working for the Chevvy dealer than the others. He is now managing a parts operation. I know little else about local dealers, other than the general comment that their prices are high compared with Baltimore and Washington on new cars. Each has a monopoly on his make.

A friend was was transferred to Kansas for six months temporary duty then considered buying a new car and having a second car for his wife. He said that he was offered a Colt for $5150 but there was a waiting list. I imagine that this is a low price for today and I also imagine that a similar or identical car is offered by Dodge. (There is a local Plymouth dealer but I've not been there since they made a defective simple repair that stranded me on a superhighway about 15 years ago. Didn't fasten the distributor cap and it popped off.)

We rarely have more than the two of us in the car, so a two-door is adequate. I do need to be able to get lawnmowers into it because the boys who do my mowing are careless and repairs are fairly frequent. It may be that a small hatchback would be even more convenient that the Valiant's trunk.

I've done no looking around because I am so ignorant about all that is new in autos and makes. I guess I really want to learn more before I do any looking around.

Diesel is readily available locally, although I'd have to learn where. Another man who uses the same mall for therapy has a Chevvy of some kind about two years old that uses diesel. I know nothing about its advantages and/or disadvantages.

Or about guarantees that would mean much with the little mileage I put on. Often only 4 miles a day.

Or why some of the newest cars seem to be the most rusted.

As I balance the various considerations I think that ease of entry and exit and headroom are more important to us now than effeciency.

Probably most of the extras would not be of any real value as long as there is a good heater and an ordinary radio. We've never had an air conditioner in a car but I suppose now that we are older it could make for more comfort for the short periods we are in it. Much of the summer it is close to 90 and when the air is bad, even when it is not that warm we use the house air conditioning, just to get better air. So

maybe air conditioning, if not too costly, would have a value.

I'm trying to think of everything so that, if you have time, you can counsel me better.

If you are not aware of it, and you are too young to have personal knowledge, when I was a boy there were electric cars and I never saw a man drive one. They appear to have been intended for women. They were steered by a tiller, were slow, simple in the body, had high wheels, and I don't recall either an open one or one that had a back seat.

I had not thought of trading the Valiant in because it must have a very low book value. I don't know if it is old enough to interest any collectors, but I thought that if it isn't I'd do better advertising it and selling it myself.

I'll cash something in and pay cash for the car if I get one. I have no debt, never get anything I can't pay cash for, and would not dream of leaving any debt for my wife to contend with.

I also have no way of knowing whether a 1984 can be a better value than a 1985.

* *

Not much new here. I'm limited in what I can do, can't spend as much time at my desk, am still kept tied down in court by the government, and the judges are getting more afraid to do or say anything against the government than ever. They are all pro-government and even lie and make things up in their decisions. Reagan has done what FDR tried and couldn't do. He's packed the courts with activists. This may for the present please genuine conservatives but in time it will shame all but right-wing extremists.

Every time I try to get back to writing there is a new interruption and I have to lay it aside again. I keep hoping that I'll get to where I have no interruptions other than the regular medical needs. I'm not supposed to be out in the wintertime for more than about 10 minutes at a time unless I'm in a heated car, so maybe with the bad weather will come better working conditions. I'm still able to tend the stove and handle the firewood as long as I stay within my limits, and if I exceed them, I know it right away and feel it even more later. But once the flowers are dormant I'll be moving the winter's firewood up to and around the house so I can bring it in through the most convenient of the three doors. I move a garden cart of it, rest, and repeat up to 3-4 times a day. It is now stacked and covered about 100 feet from the house. Although I can walk on for only about a city block at a time, I have found that if I do not stand for long and move around a bit I can be on the leg for a half-hour or more. I learned this when our 150 or more pines were suddenly infested with borers and the people I hired to spray them didn't show up. I had to do it. Took three days, but I made it. Had to do this every 30 days, too. Gave me a real sense of accomplishment and the surgeon could say only "remarkable!" I think the key was oxygen demand by the muscles, little moving, little demand. I hope you do not have to learn what oxygen deficiency in the muscles is. And it hurts!

I hope you are prospering in your new place and that you are all well and happy. If you can help, thanks in advance, and if you cannot, please just tell me. Thanks and best to you all,

Harold